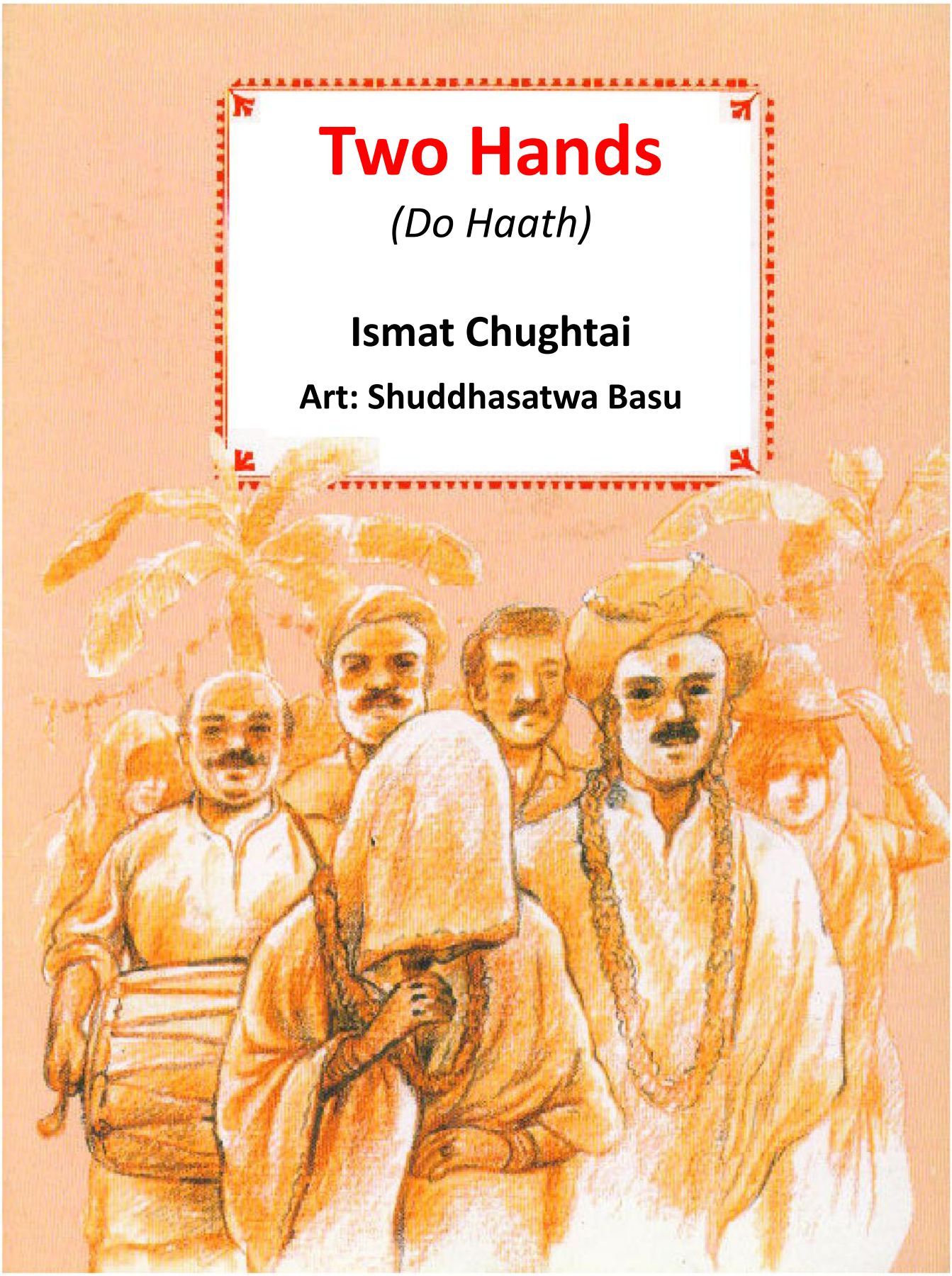
Two Hands

(Do Haath)

Ismat Chughtai

Art: Shuddhasatwa Basu



Ismat Chughtai

Ismat Chughtai holds a distinct place in Urdu fiction. She never accepted the conservative traditions of society. In her stories, she portrayed social realities in such a way that they could not be denied. Some of her major novels include “Ziddi” and “Tedhi Lakeer”.

For a time, Chughtai was also involved in filmmaking. She had a knack for exposing—often through satire—the oppression inflicted by humans upon one another and the hollowness of society. "Do Haath" (Two Hands) is one such story.

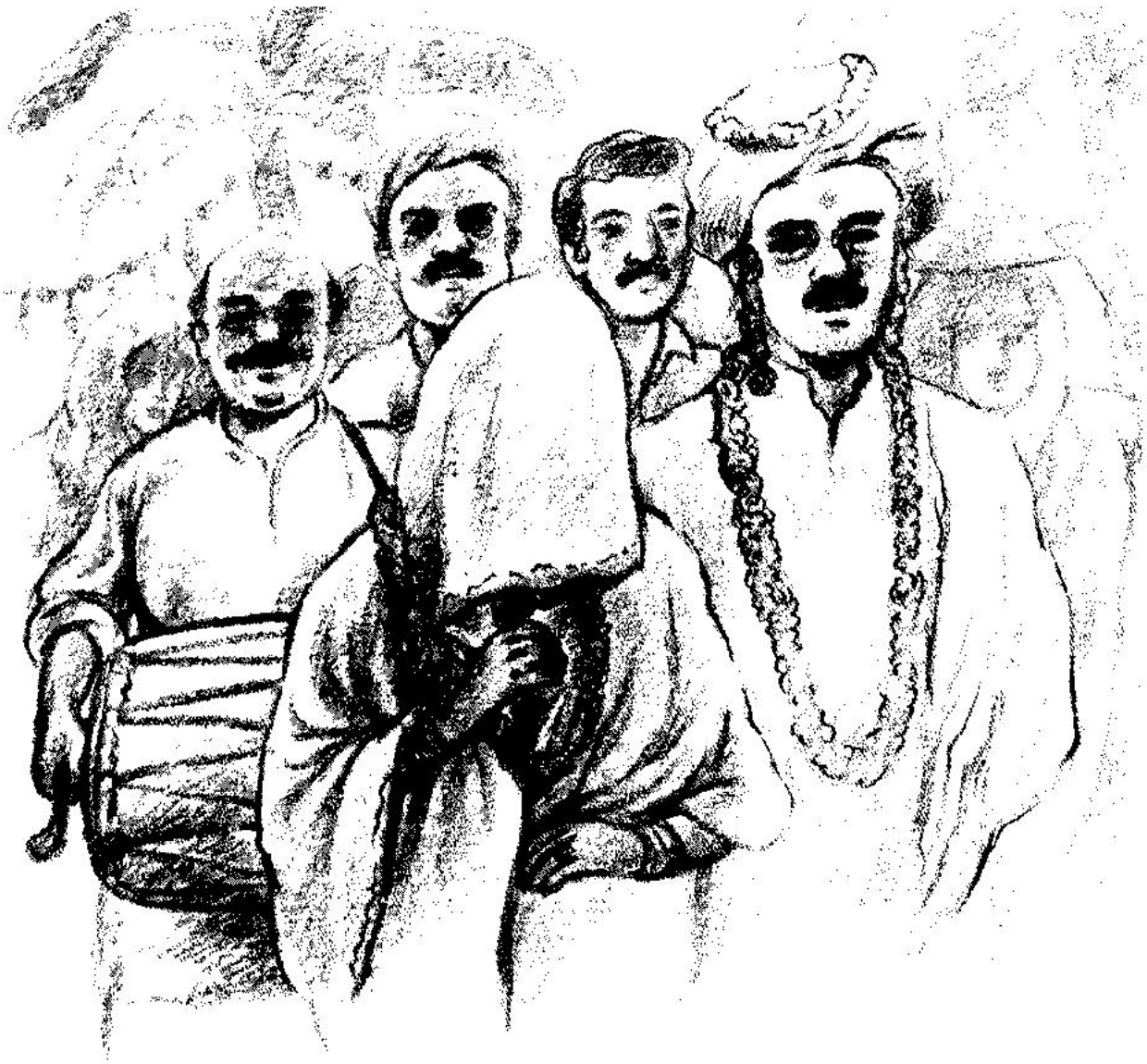
Tears glistened in the old sweeper-woman's eyes. Her son, Ram Avatar, was coming home.

After three whole years!

He had been called up for army service in the very first year of his marriage. Now, after such a long time, he was finally returning.

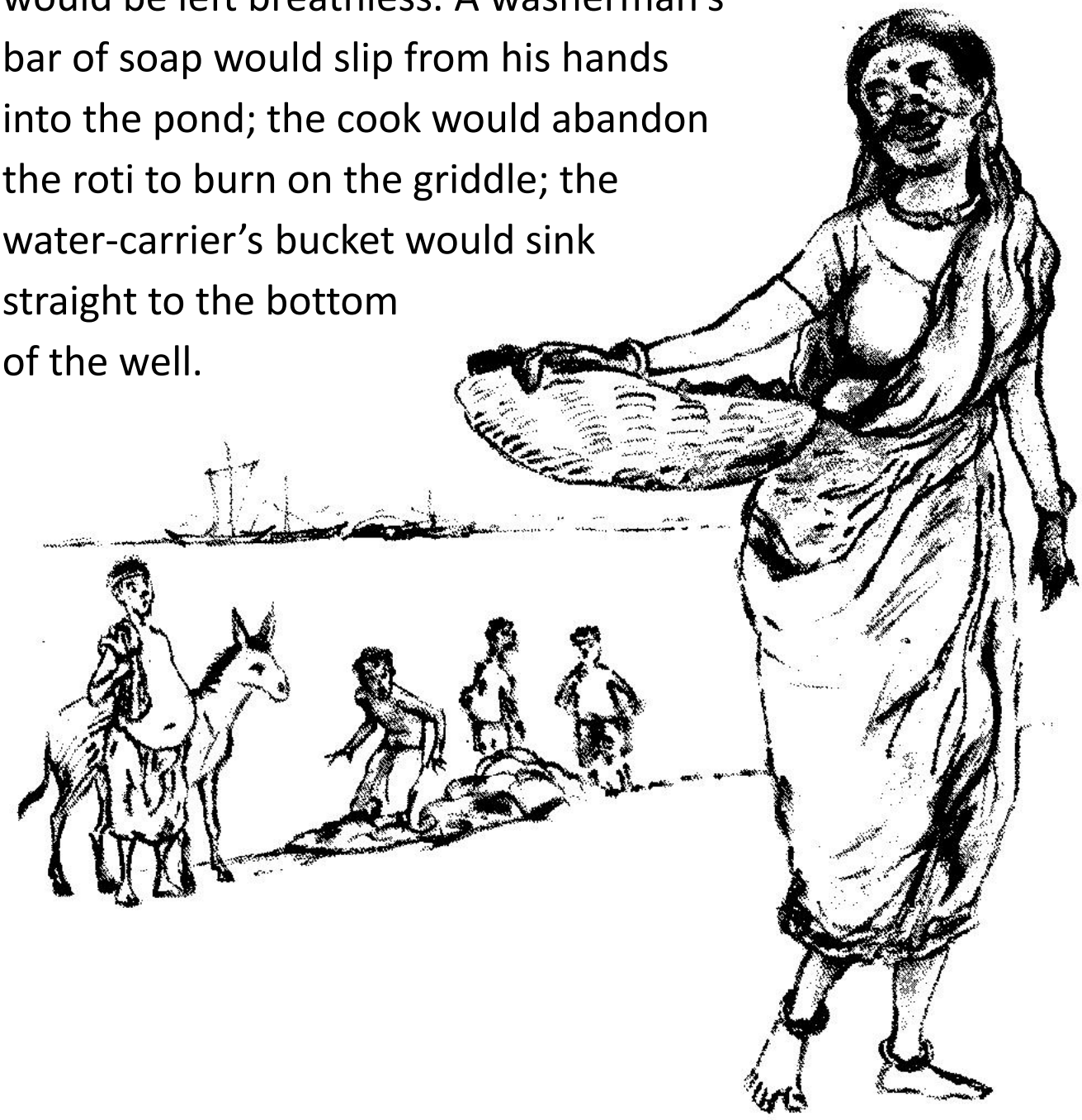
Everyone in the neighbourhood was waiting for Ram Avatar. They were all anticipating the drama that would unfold upon his return.

Granted, Ram Avatar hadn't gone to the front lines to fire cannons or guns. Yet, having spent his time clearing up the soldiers' filth, he must have acquired a bit of a soldier's swagger. How could it be otherwise? Surely, his blood would boil when he heard about his wife's antics.



When she had first arrived as a bride, she was a picture of delicate, fair-skinned beauty. As long as Ram Avatar was around, her “ghoonghat” (veil) hung a full foot long on her face. The day her husband left for the front, she had wept inconsolably. For a while, she carried on with tear-filled eyes and a bowed head, hauling the basket of filth.

Then, gradually, the length of her veil began to shrink. Everything seemed to change the moment Ram Avatar left. Now she constantly giggled and there was a new, flirtatious air about her. Whenever she passed by—carrying a basket of filth on her waist and with her bronze bangles jingling—people would be left breathless. A washerman's bar of soap would slip from his hands into the pond; the cook would abandon the roti to burn on the griddle; the water-carrier's bucket would sink straight to the bottom of the well.



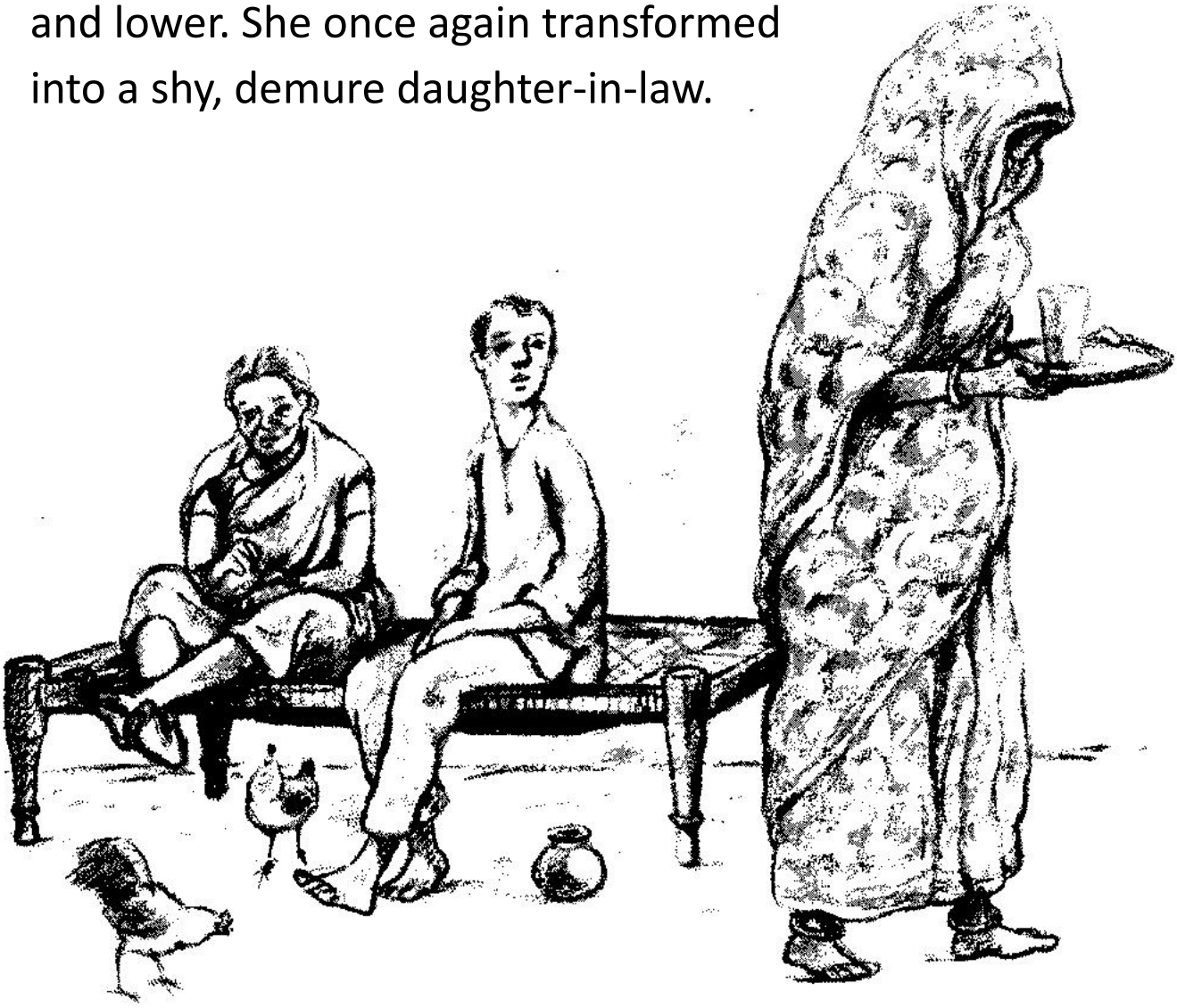
Though named was Gori – the Fair One, but in fact, she was pitch-black. She had a broad, flat nose, a wide mouth, and teeth that looked as though they had never known a cleaning agent. Even after applying thick black kohl (kajal) on her eyes, the squint in her right eye remained visible. Her waist lacked suppleness, too; but diet of leftover scraps which she ate was made it grow broad.

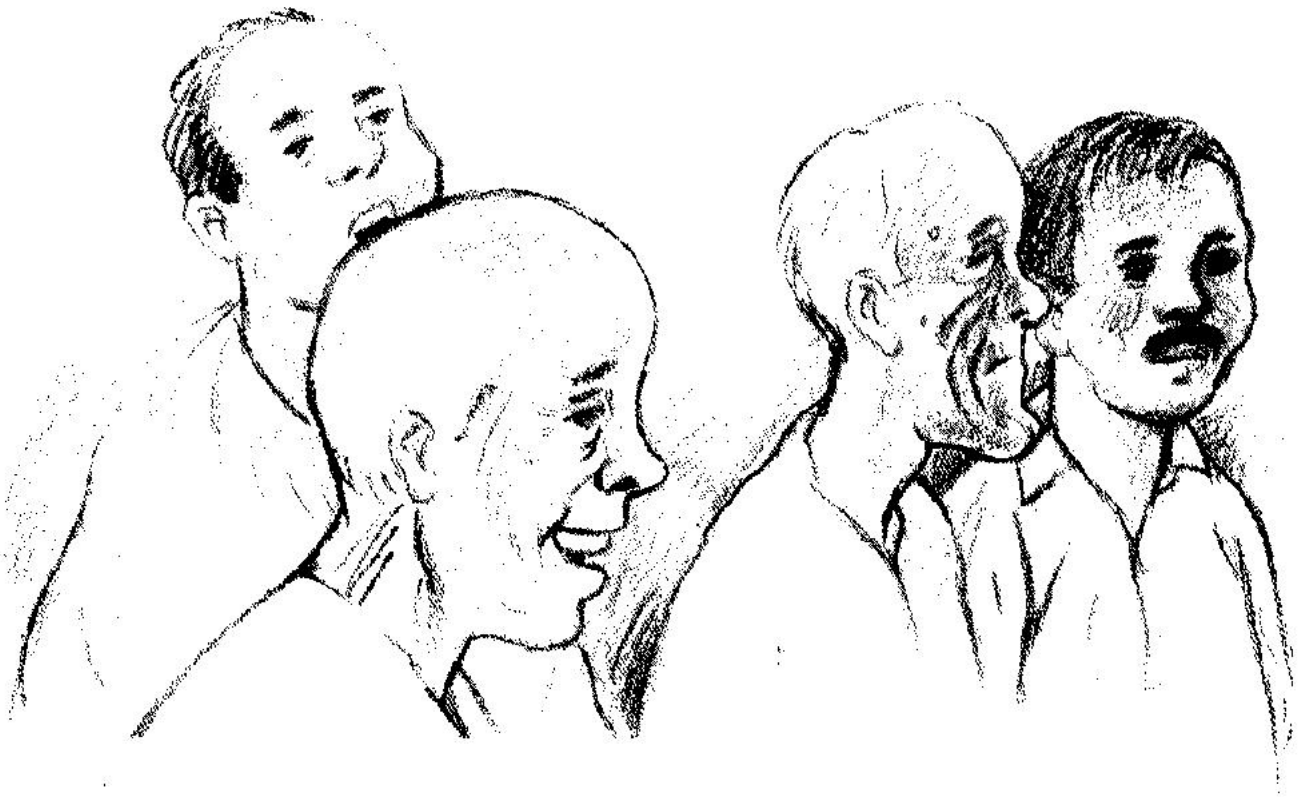
Yet, wherever she went, she caused a stir—a veritable storm.

After Ram Avatar went away, the old sweeper-woman's daughter-in-law took over all the work. The old woman's twilight years depended entirely on the young woman's labour. The daughter-in-law's true nature was no secret to the old woman, but she lacked the strength to send back a daughter-in-law who had been bought for two hundred rupees. Her father would simply marry her off again for four hundred. But how would the old woman manage the work of the entire neighbourhood all alone? Thinking this, she remained silent.

A few days later, the old sweeper-woman's nephew, Ratiram, came to visit and ended up staying with her. He took over the workload that had increased across several bungalows. Back in his village, he had merely been a loafer.

With Ratiram's arrival, the atmosphere shifted completely. The daughter-in-law's laughter ceased. Her bronze bangles fell silent. Her veil began to drop lower and lower. She once again transformed into a shy, demure daughter-in-law.





Then, one day, the bearded police inspector revealed to everyone the illicit relationship between the daughter-in-law and Ratiram. The old sweeper-woman was summoned; when questioned, however, she raised a hue and cry in protest. She said that people had become her enemies for no reason. Since Ram Avatar was away, people began casting lewd glances at her daughter-in-law. The old woman said that Gori missed and shed tears for her husband morning and evening, work herself to the bone, and give no one any cause for complaint.

After a while, the gossip about the daughter-in-law's affair began to die down; people started to forget. Yet, the observant ones sensed that something was amiss. The daughter-in-law's visibly swelling belly could not remain hidden from the public for long. People tried to reason with the old woman: "Save Ratiram from disgrace before Ram Avatar returns—get the daughter-in-law treated. The pregnancy can be easily terminated."

But who knows what had come over the old woman? She allowed the trouble she could have easily averted to grow unchecked, turning a blind eye to it all.

A few days later, the daughter-in-law gave birth to a son. People were astonished when, instead of poisoning the child, the old woman beamed with joy. She showed no surprise at the birth of a grandson two years after Ram Avatar’s departure. She immediately had a letter written to him: "Lots of love to Ram Avatar. All is well at home. The news is that a son has been born in your home. Treat this letter like a telegram and come home quickly."

The boy was about a year old when Ram Avatar returned. Upon seeing him, the old woman clung to his waist and wept. Ram Avatar, seeing the boy, began to blush—acting just as a father would. He quickly opened his trunk and pulled out a red vest and yellow socks.

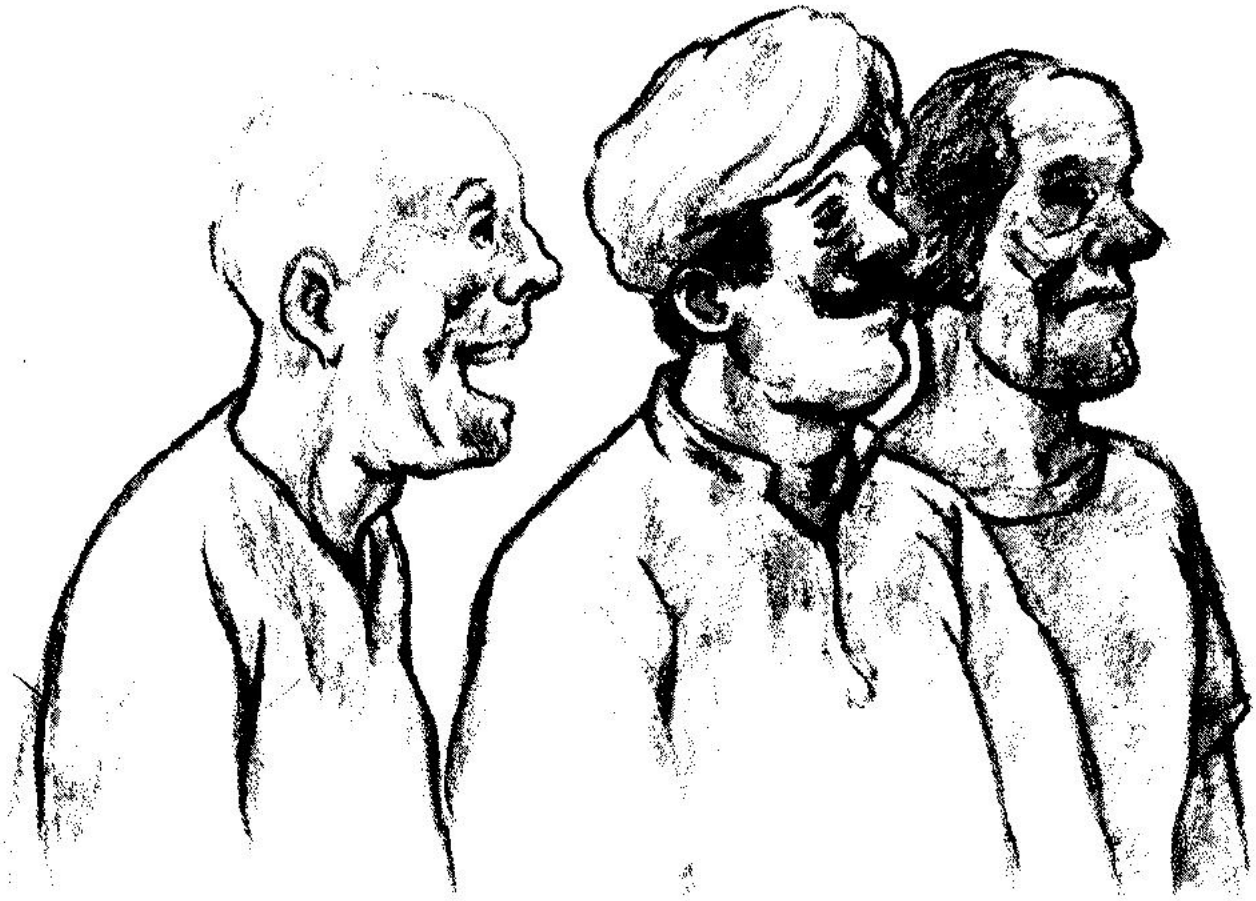
People felt more anger than surprise at this behaviour of Ram Avatar’s.

"Tell me, you’ve returned after three years, haven't you?"

"I’m not sure, Sir; it could be a little more or less."

"But the boy here is a year old."

"He looks that age, but he’s a real rascal!" Ram Avatar said bashfully.



“Now, you figure it out yourself.”

“What am I supposed to figure out, Sir?”

“You fool! How did this happen?”

“How should I know, Sir? It’s God’s doing.”

“God’s doing! Rubbish—this boy cannot be yours.”

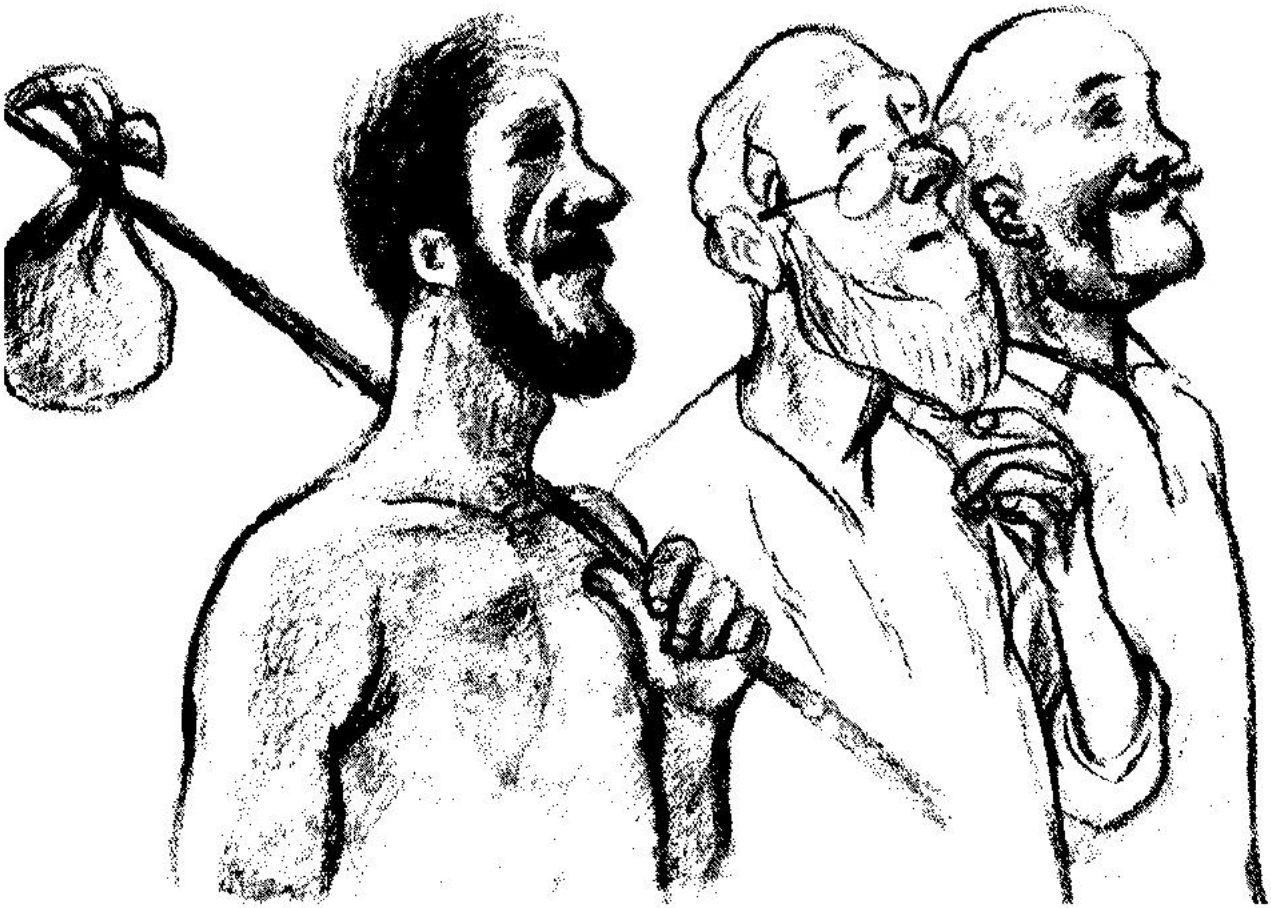
“Then what am I to do, Sir... I gave Gori a sound thrashing,” he said, flaring up in anger.

“Hey... throw Gori out—why don’t you just throw her out?”

“No, Sir, is that even possible?” Ram Avatar began to plead.

“Why not?”

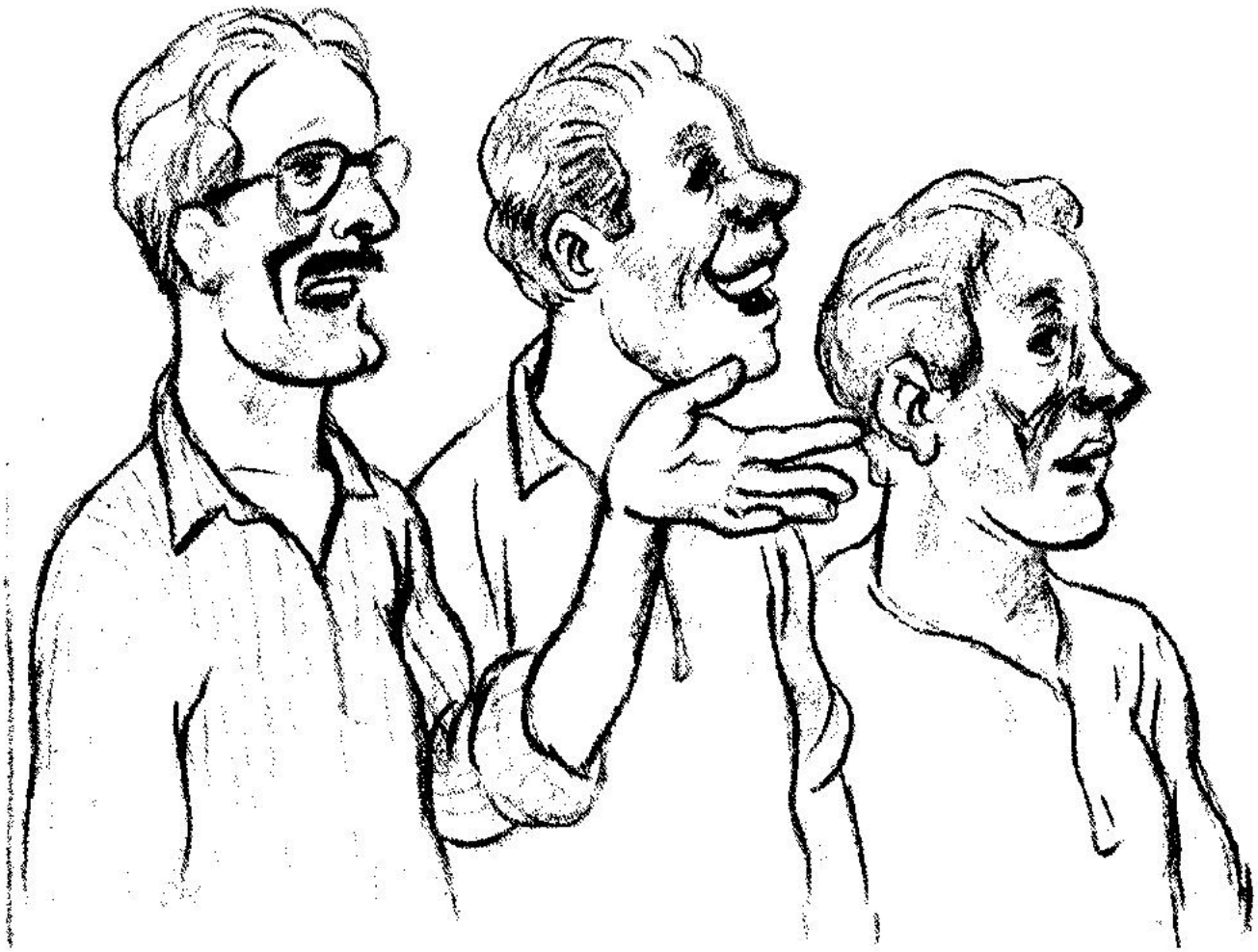
“Huzoor, where would I get another two or three hundred rupees for a second marriage? And feeding the community would cost another hundred or two on top of that.”



"Why, brother, why do you have to feed the community? Why do you have to suffer the consequences of your daughter-in-law's mischief?"

"I don't know, Sir, this is what happens among us."

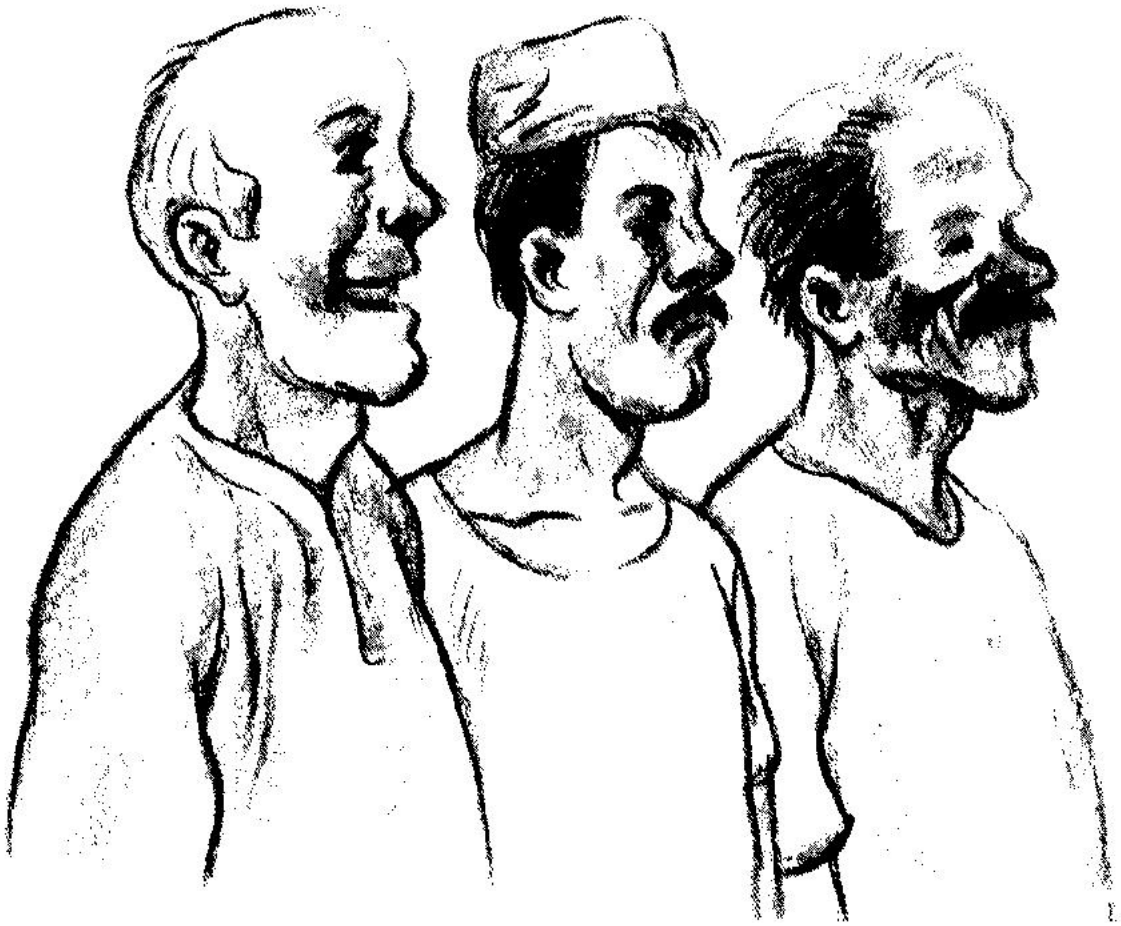
"But the boy isn't yours, Ram Avtaar... he belongs to that bastard Ratiram."



"So what, Sir, Ratiram is my brother, not a stranger, he's my own blood."

"You're a complete fool."

"Sir, when the boy grows up, he'll help me," Ram Avtaar explained pleadingly. "He'll help me get through my old age."



And for some unknown reason, everyone bowed their heads along with Ram Avtaar.

As if millions upon millions of hands had filled their hearts, hands that were neither bastards nor slaves. These were simply living hands, easing the burden of the world.

The End